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MAINSTREAMING GENDER TO PROMOTE OPPORTUNITIES THROUGH THE INCREASED CONTRIBUTION OF WOMEN TO COMPETITIVENESS

Note by the UNCTAD secretariat

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Introduction

1. Gender has been on UNCTAD's agenda since the preparation of UNCTAD X. The first Expert Workshop was convened by the secretariat as a pre-Conference event and dealt with the issues of trade, sustainable development and gender[1]. Moreover, it clearly identified the need for mainstreaming gender in UNCTAD's substantive work, calling for increased acknowledgement of the potential of gender equality in achieving developmental goals. A gender dimension was also successfully integrated into the preparatory process for the Third United Nations Conference on Least Developed Countries. This was reflected in the insertion of increased emphasis on gender equality in the Programme of Action adopted by the Conference in all areas of developmental concern for the least developed countries (LDCs).[2]

2. Building on these undertakings and in response to the growing awareness of the role of gender in advancing development goals, the Expert Meeting on Mainstreaming Gender to Promote Opportunities was convened from 14 – 16 November 2001 with the aim to further enhance its understanding and to strengthen the consensus of member States vis-à-vis the developmental role of gender. The mandate for this Expert Meeting was to consider "ways to improve the contribution of women in developing their countries' and regions' competitiveness, in increasing trading opportunities and in attracting investment and technology".

3. The Expert Meeting focused on five thematic areas in accordance with UNCTAD's substantive mandate for considering the critical aspect of gender for trade and development. These issues are: (i) foreign direct investment; (ii) trade in services; (iii) trade in commodities; (iv) enterprise development; and (v) the potential impact of information and communication technologies (ICTs). The specific problems of LDCs were addressed in a cross-sectoral manner.

4. The Experts, representing both developed and developing countries discussed the above issues on the basis of an issues note by the secretariat[3]. Their deliberations resulted in the adoption of the Outcome[4], which outlines specific recommendations and policy options addressed to Governments and to the international community, including UNCTAD.

5. The purpose of this note is to assist the Commission in its consideration of the policy issues related to gender mainstreaming examined by the Experts. It is divided into three sections. The first section outlines specific policy issues adopted by the Experts for consideration by the Commission at the national level. The second section explores possible areas of future work for UNCTAD, and the third section presents some concluding remarks.

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1 The UNCTAD X Expert Workshop on Trade, Sustainable Development and Gender was held on 12 – 13 July 1999 in Geneva and its results are contained in Trade, sustainable development and gender. Papers prepared in support of the themes discussed at the Pre-UNCTAD X Expert Workshop on Trade, Sustainable Development and Gender, New York and Geneva 1999 (UNCTAD/EDM/Misc.78).

2 Programme of Action for the Least Developed Countries, adopted by the Third United Nations Conference on the Least Developed Countries. (A/CONF.191/11) and Outcome of the Pre-LDC III Workshop on LDCs: Building Capacities for Mainstreaming Gender in Development Strategies, Adopted in Cape Town on 21 – 23 March 2001 (A/CONF.191/BP/2).

3 Expert Meeting on Mainstreaming Gender in Order to Promote Opportunities, Note by the UNCTAD secretariat. (TD/B/COM.3/EM.14/2).

4 Outcome of the Expert Meeting on Mainstreaming Gender in Order to Promote Opportunities (TD/B/COM.3/EM.14/L.1).

I. National level policy questions for consideration by the Commission

6. Linked to the five thematic areas selected for examination by the Expert Meeting, the following policy aspects emerged in the deliberations and were reflected in the Meeting's Outcome.

Foreign direct investment (FDI)

7. It is widely recognized that foreign direct investment (FDI) has a substantial impact on employment and its gender structure. This impact varies across countries and sectors and is also significantly influenced by employment practices and approaches adopted by investors. Moreover, policy makers of host countries can design and implement policy tools to ensure that FDI not only advances developmental goals, but also reflects the importance of both sexes in terms of their contribution to economic activities.

8. While acknowledging the scope for national policies, the Experts also emphasized the importance of further research on the impact of employment practices derived from investments to ensure that policy makers make informed decisions on gender-aware policies as they relate to FDI. In this light, it was considered essential to systematically collect sex-disaggregated data on employment and wages, which did not seem to be the practice in most FDI host countries.

9. The Experts expressed concern over some forms of FDI and called for the screening of FDI flows with regard to their consistency with macro-economic and development goals, including gender equality. In this respect, experts reiterated the need for promoting gender-sensitivity and social responsibility in the private sector. It was deemed appropriate to take into account gender impact when designing programmes targeting FDI and strategies geared to attract FDI into particular sectors and industries.

Trade in Services

10. In order to devise appropriate policy actions, it was considered essential to better understand the gender dimension of trade in services. Due consideration of development concerns, equity in the distribution of trade benefits and the issue of social impact were crucial aspects to be incorporated in public policies applied to the service sector. Trade in services has already demonstrated a great potential for growth, as well as raised particular questions concerning the contribution by women. Examples provided by the Experts in this respect related to health services and tourism, where, the above had not been adequately addressed. This had sometimes resulted in unfair treatment of women providers of particular services.

11. The Experts also recognized that the services sector is one of those sectors where exact data, especially sex-disaggregated ones, is not easily available or made available. In this context, the Experts proposed that Governments press for better collection, classification and analysis of statistics and qualitative data, to grasp the special characteristics of women's work in services. This was considered to be the basis for formulating adequate policies for social and gender equality in services.

12. For the purpose of increasing the competitiveness of women in the services sector, the Experts invited Governments to devise and implement direct programmes and encourage voluntary, targeted actions by the business community in order to promote productivity in services.

13. The Experts recognized the potential vulnerabilities of developing countries in the area of multilateral and regional negotiations, especially with respect to the services sector. While negotiating, developing countries need to take into account not only their broader developmental goals, but should also ensure that gender is considered, especially concerning gender sensitive sectors, such as health services or tourism.

14. The Experts also emphasized the need for the increased participation of women in policy and decision making by improving their competencies/skills in leadership roles in trade in services.

Trade in commodities

15. The greatest obstacle for increasing the contribution of women in the area of commodities is women's blocked access to economic assets especially land, property, and all the benefits deriving therefrom. This has obvious negative implications on their participation in the production process of commodities, as well as its trade. In some cases, blocked access is the result of an inefficient legal framework and resilient customary laws. In this respect, the Experts believed that Governments should review laws, policies and administrative practices, including customary and traditional laws, to ensure equal access to land ownership, rights to property and earnings, and credit in rural areas.

16. Given the unequal participation of women in productive processes, the Experts recommended Governments undertake proactive policies aimed at encouraging the creation of cooperatives and enterprises for women. These proactive policies would facilitate women's access to information, communication, technologies and trading networks, for their full potential to be duly utilized. Governments could play a vital role though initiating and encouraging activities aimed at providing business support services, such as marketing and business planning for women. These measures could also be strengthened by gender-sensitive, agricultural extension programmes.

Enterprise development

17. The Experts recognized that women's participation in entrepreneurial activities is rather limited in a number of developing countries. Due to the unavailability of productive resources, women were excluded from productive and marketing processes, and were therefore unable to draw benefits to ensure their livelihoods. Once again, the Experts felt that this was a consequence of a combination of factors and placed the blame on legal, regulatory and financial systems.

18. In this respect, Governments should review and adopt laws and commercial regulations to enhance women's access to ownership and the effective use of economic resources. In order to facilitate women's access to the financial resources required for any of the economic initiatives in entrepreneurship, the Experts called upon Governments to ensure that domestic financial institutions reach those segments of prospective women entrepreneurs not yet adequately served, by undertaking a set of affirmative actions in the field of financing and banking.

19. The Experts also recommended that public institutions support the creation of national networks of women entrepreneurs and business associations. Such networks and associations could increase women's participation in economic activities, as well as enhance their capacity to influence economic decision making on the national level.

Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs)

20. Recent major breakthroughs in the development of information and communication technologies resulting in the creation of the Internet, which was seen as a public good, necessitated active public policies to ensure that its benefits were shared by both men and women. The issue of women's access to ICTs is still a major concern in many countries. The inability of women to access the Internet negatively affected their participation in the labour market. Such gender inequality and bias in Internet access also resulted from a combination of factors, most notably infrastructure requirements and the perception role of women in society.

21. In this respect, the Experts called for Governments to secure and allocate the required resources to satisfy the necessary infrastructure requirements (telephone lines, Internet provider services, etc.) as a crucial, long-term developmental goal. Some measures, however, could be applied immediately, even in the absence of huge infrastructure investment. Governments, in cooperation with local authorities, could establish or support the establishment of Internet centres with affordable pricing structures which would ensure women's access to the Internet. These policies could also be accompanied by various awareness raising and training programmes aimed not only at the simple use of the Internet but, most importantly, at ensuring that women take advantage of the opportunities offered, such as those of setting up businesses.

22. The Experts also recognized that women's representation in the information technology industry is less than satisfactory. In their view, Governments should: enact policies aimed at increasing the enrolment of female students in ICT related courses through specific promotion campaigns and scholarships; ensure the participation of women in the design and development of new technologies, and ensure the representation of women in ICT policy-making bodies.

II. Proposals addressed to the international community and UNCTAD

Foreign Direct Investment (FDI)

23. The Experts recognized the importance of information sharing between Governments on best practice examples from different industries and countries related to employment equality (including recruitment, training, promotion and working conditions) in transnational corporations (TNCs), especially in export processing/free trade zones. Such exchange of information would ensure that national policies take into account lessons learned. UNCTAD, together with other international organizations may wish to concentrate on these issues in the framework of its programmes dealing with FDI and TNCs.

24. The Experts also called upon UNCTAD to integrate a gender perspective in all future analyses and research, as well as in the advisory services related to FDI and its impact on host

economies. They also called upon UNCTAD to examine TNC subcontracting approaches in terms of the effects on supplier firms and the informal sector.

Trade in Services

25. In the area of trade in services the Experts recognized the importance of considering the trade liberalization process in its entirety. In this context, they identified the need for establishing appropriate international standards for business and professional qualifications and conduct. As a lack of these measures could bring negative consequences to women's livelihood, the Experts concluded that UNCTAD may wish to investigate this issue further.

26. In the area of statistics, the Experts believed UNCTAD was well suited to participate in the process of designing and implementing the collection of suitable information in the service sector.

Trade in Commodities

27. It was recognized that women, given their share of labour in the production of some high value added commodities such as fresh fruits and vegetables, could benefit if these products were adequately marketed. In this respect, women could acquire expertise in achieving quality standards in each market segment in the importing country through training. UNCTAD, with ITC could organize relevant workshops, as well as other capacity-building activities, including technical assistance programmes.

28. The Experts recognized the potential of agro-tourism as a means of enhancing women's economic participation in rural areas. As such, they called on UNCTAD to seek ways and means to explore the potential and opportunities offered by such initiatives.

Enterprise development

29. The Experts underlined the importance of information sharing and networking among women entrepreneurs. These activities undoubtedly increased women's potential to conduct business and to become economically more independent. In this respect, experts proposed that UNCTAD, in cooperation with other international organizations, promote regional networks of women entrepreneurs and business associations.

30. Given the existing enterprise development programmes in UN organizations, the Experts felt that it was essential that these organizations remain up-to-date of the others' activities and jointly contribute to improving the coherence of policies and strategies at both the national and international levels.

Information and Communications Technology (ICTs)

31. Mainstreaming gender in the overall work on ICT and e-commerce is a matter of urgency. The Experts recommended that UNCTAD continue its work on identifying ways and means in which ICT and e-commerce could create new economic opportunities for women. In this regard the Experts felt that UNCTAD should undertake analytical and case-study-based work on gender-specific opportunities of the digital economy, with special emphasis on: i) the level of

employment provided to women in ICT-related services sectors; ii) the extent to which these sectors are involved in export; and iii) the type of employment foreign firms provide in these service sectors, from a gender perspective.

III. Concluding remarks

32. The Expert Meeting provided a unique opportunity to discuss policy options concerning gender and development within the framework of UNCTAD's intergovernmental machinery. The initial, informal feedback from both experts and other Government representatives, and the level of participation and debate, as reflected in the Outcome, indicate that mainstreaming gender is important to UNCTAD's role and mandate. The Meeting also called on UNCTAD to play a role in mainstreaming gender issues in its work.

33. The Experts highlighted the following points on how UNCTAD could best address the gender and development dimension in its work and activities:

- Support various technical assistance initiatives for aiding women in capacity-building and initiatives for the production and commercialization of commodities;
- Advocate gender sensitive policies in multilateral and regional trade negotiations, in line with the liberalization of trade in services;
- Undertake analysis on the gender impact of FDI in host countries, as well as examine subcontracting practices of TNCs, with a view to identify opportunities for gender equality;
- Promote regional networks of women entrepreneurs, as well as further UNCTAD's links to enterprise development programmes of other UN agencies;
- Mainstream gender in UNCTAD's overall work and develop programmes in which ICTs and e-commerce could create new economic opportunities for women, in cooperation with Governments and other UN specialized agencies.